His Master's Voice

The velvety voice is back. Before he picks up the microphone all over again — same time, same station — Ameen Sayani takes a trip down memory lane with

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THE second floor of Cecill Court, an old building near Regal cinema at Colaba, reverberates with an extremely familiar voice, uttering "Hello...testing...testing". A door prominently displays 'Sayani'. And one knows it couldn't be anyone else but the father of radio broadcasting (or DJ-ing, if that's what it could be called now)... Ameen Sayani. It's his small, swanky studio and the man is in control.

The golden voice is at it again. Sayani is recording *Colgate Cibaca Geetmala*, a weekly countdown, which goes on air from 22 stations of Vividh Bharati at 9.00 pm every Sunday. Unlike novices who fumble with words before the microphone, the master broadcaster thrives on staccato. Only when he is through with his recording can one prompt him to talk. *Colgate Cibaca Geetmala* was first *Geetmala* on Radio Ceylon, then *Binaca Geetmala* and later *Cibaca Geetmala* on Vividh Bharati. What is its new avatar? "It used to be a one-hour countdown show of hit Hindi film songs. Now we present a mix of old and new numbers in just 20 minutes. We try to slip in some interesting information about stars on whom a particular song has been picturised," Sayani says. "We have to change with time. If we have been given 20 minutes, we have to accommodate ourselves."

Sayani surely knows how to accept new challenges. In 1952, when All India Radio banned Hindi film music, Sayani turned to Radio Ceylon. His weekly countdown became so popular that in villages people would ensure that the radio sets they bought could tune in to Radio Ceylon. "Hindi film music was a powerful medium. It attracted people from all backgrounds," he says. And *Geetmala* certainly played a vital role in popularising this music. It became the index of a song's success. It was mentioned in films as well – like this scene in *Abhimaan*, where Asrani tells Amitabh Bachchan that his songs are played on *Geetmala*. Many people in the music industry tried to influence Sayani, but he never succumbed to any pressure. "I told them that the programme's credibility would go the day we lowered our guards and compromised on the method of deciding ratings," he says. And there are two sources whom he falls back on for ratings — around 200 radio clubs and sales figures from cassette and video shops.

But the aggrieved were not convinced. Once a delegation of music directors went to the office of Cibaca Company and complained that they would lose their bread and butter if *Geetmala* didn't stop broadcasting the ratings of different songs. "For a year, we didn't tell people which paudaan (popularity chart) different songs had reached. But in our annual ratings, we disclosed it. Finally, we had to revert to our old system of ratings," he says.

But what was it about *Geetmala* and Sayani? Why did it click? Independent India was mesmerised by the magic of the like of Raj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand and Suraiyaa. It was the golden era of Hindi film music, when lyricists like Sahir Ludhiyanvi, Shakeel Badayuni, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Shailendra and Hasrat Jaipuri wrote some hauntingly beautiful numbers. So when Sayani played Mohammed Rafi's *Maine chand aur sitaron ki tamanna ki thi, mujhko raaton ki seyahi (darkness) ke siwa kuch na mila* from the film *Chandrakanta*, people stopped. And when he played Lata Mangeshkar's *Aeji roothkar ab kahan jaayega* from *Arzoo*, it was lapped up instantly.

People would wait for Sayani's weekly rendezvous, almost always opening with *Bahno-bhaiyon, Geetmala mein apka swagat hai*. He was flooded with letters, many of them from school children. A child once wrote: 'Ameen uncle, you have travelled all over, which country is the most beautiful?' 'Undoubtedly, India', said Sayani, winning many more admirers. *Geetmala* spawned a number of Sayani's clones who tried to imitate him. "I don't know whether they succeeded in their attempts or not, but it hasn't harmed me at all. I speak simple Hindustani, the language I picked up in the marketplace, even though I am more proficient in English," says Sayani, who had initially joined his elder brother Hamid Sayani in English broadcasting at All India Radio.

And the fact that *Geetmala* is back means that television is no threat to radio. "Radio's reach is vast. However, what has come in the way of the growth of this medium is bureaucratic interference. But commercial broadcasting will always have a market," he says, ending on an optimistic note.